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THE RELIGIOUS IDEAS OF THE BOOK OF
ECCLESIASTICUS. II.

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5. Recompense.—The principle that sin brings evil to its doer, and righteousness, good, is maintained in Sirach without the slightest reservation. “Do not evil, and evil will not happen to you. Depart from what is unrighteous, and it will turn aside from you. Son, do not sow in the furrows of unrighteousness, and you will not reap in them sevenfold” (7: 1-3). No sin goes unpunished (7: 8). No good deed is forgotten (17: 22-23 [17-18]). But what of the facts of life that make against the principle? Sirach has two things to say: (1) The sufferings of the righteous are disciplinary; (2) All will be rectified before death.

(1) That God should make use of severity in the instruction of good men is in exact harmony with Sirach's view of the way in which a right life must be learned (see above, 3.). The inference lay close at hand. “Son, if thou dost set out to serve the Lord prepare thy soul for trial. . . . All that comes upon thee accept. . . . For gold is tried in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation” (1: 1-6). Affliction may therefore be a sign of God's special favor (*cf.* Prov. 3: 11-12). Even things that are evil to the wicked are good to the righteous (39: 25, 27). If we do not see that it is so, that is due to our ignorance. “It is not to be said, This is worse than that, for all things in time will be approved” (39: 34, *cf.* vv. 17-21).

(2) But if the sufferings of the righteous are disciplinary, it is already implied that they are temporary. And so Sirach insists that all will be straightened out in the end. He makes frequent appeal to “the last things” (*ta eschata*) to justify his doctrine of recompense; and by “last things” he means not the future life, but the end of life, its latter days. Here then in the strictest sense is Sirach's eschatology.

The most obvious blessings of a man's latter days are long life, riches, honor, friends and a peaceful death; and these Sirach confidently promises to the good and wise; while calamity will surely darken or cut short the age of those who enjoy prosperity in unrighteousness. "To him that fears the Lord it shall be well at the last; and at the day of his death he shall be accounted blessed (1: 13 [11]). "Do not envy the glory of a sinner, for thou knowest not what shall be his end. Be not pleased with the pleasures of the ungodly; remember that they will not be justified until death," i. e. punishment will overtake them before they die (9: 11-12 *cf.* 27: 29). There is indeed delay in punishment, for the Lord is long-suffering. But one must not therefore say, "I sinned and what happened to me?" nor ought one to put off turning to the Lord from day to day, for the day of vengeance will come suddenly (5: 4-7). It is easy for the Lord to bring prosperity or adversity in a moment, and "at the end of a man's life there is a revelation of his deeds" (11: 21-28 [19-26]).

The certainty that the end will find every one treated as he deserves is one of the strongest motives to right conduct. "In all thy deeds remember thy end (*ta eschata sou*), and thou wilt not sin forever" (7: 36). "Remember the end and cease from enmities" (28: 6). Justice works itself out in the end in the earthly life of every man, and the day of visitation or judgment is the day in the individual's life when calamity comes from the Lord upon the righteous for trial (18: 20 [19], 24 [23]; 22: 11), upon the wicked for punishment (5: 7, 8; 39: 28). It is impossible to give a due impression of the confidence with which Sirach maintains this proposition without more quotations than space permits.* The case of failure is not so much as considered. This is surprising when we consider the late date of the writing, and the fact that books like Job and Ecclesiastes have been written.

This then is the way that Sirach vindicated the doctrine of recompense against contradictory facts of experience; not by

* See 2: 8; 7: 16, 17; 10: 6-18; 12: 2, 6; 16: 6-23 [21]; 17: 15-24 [13-19]; 21: 5; 23: 11, 12, 18, 19; 26: 28 [19]; 35: 12-14 [32: 12-14]; 39: 28-31; 40: 8-17.

looking, as older Israel did, away from the individual's lot to the nation, satisfied if for it prosperity followed righteousness, and adversity sin; not by looking, as later Judaism came to do, away from the earthly life to a future beyond death in which justice would be manifest, or with Christianity, away from the outward life to the things of the spirit, whether present or future; but by looking from the present to the future of this life, and expecting a proper end for good and bad, an adjustment on the whole and at the least of the outward lot to character and desert. It is probably a sign of the prosperity which Sirach's son himself enjoyed and of the peaceful time in which he lived that he was able to rest in this view. If he had lived during the persecution that followed under Antiochus IV. and seen good men, because of their goodness, suffer violent death, perhaps he must have appealed to a future life for their sakes. It is clear, however, that this is not in his thought.

6. Death.—We are already prepared to find Sirach holding that death ends all, and to judge him not too harshly for that opinion, since he was both consistent and conservative in the matter. Death usually seems to him simply the inevitable and natural end of life, and if it is sometimes said to be due to sin, the reference is rather to violent and untimely death. "All flesh as a garment grows old, for the covenant from the beginning is, Thou shalt surely die" (14: 17). "Shun not the sentence of death. Remember those before thee and those after; this is the sentence from the Lord upon all flesh" (41: 3). "The son of man is not immortal" (17: 30 [25]). Death is a return of man to the earth from which he came (17: 1; 16: 30 [28]; 40: 11). Man's portion when he dies is the corruption of the grave (10: 11; 19: 3). Hades is not infrequently mentioned, but not so as to imply a conscious life after death. It is indeed often simply the equivalent of death (9: 12; 28: 21; 48: 5; 51: 6). This is still the case when it is described by negatives. There is no pleasure there (14: 16). "Praise perishes from the dead as one that is not" (17: 28 [23]). It will make no difference there whether one's life has been long or short (41: 4). It is indeed said that at the end of the sinner's way is the pit of

Hades (21: 10); but this can only mean that sin leads to sudden, premature death, for Hades is the lot of all. There is no thought that the body goes to the grave and the soul to Hades. That is a Greek, not a Hebrew conception. The idea of Hades in Sirach was then in no way inconsistent with the idea that the dead are no more; it was rather the representation to the imagination of that fact. Death is called an "eternal rest" (30: 17 *cf.* 38: 23), and an "eternal sleep" (46: 19). It is not indeed expressly said that the dead are non-existent, but they are *hōs mēde ontes*, *hōs ouk huparxantes*, "as if they did not exist," *hōs ou gegonotes*, "as if they had not been born" (17: 28 [23]; 44: 9; 38: 11). For all practical purposes they are no more, and practical purposes were all for which the Jew cared. Nor will they come back to life again; for the dead "there is no return" (38: 21). If Sirach urges careful attention to burial and its services it is only for the sake of form, to avoid calumny and gain favor; it does no good to the dead, and is even the type of a useless service (38: 16-23; 7: 33-35; 22: 11-12 [9-10]; 30: 18). He does not indeed hesitate to accept the Old Testament accounts of translation and of the revival of the dead, but these are simply miraculous events and do not lead to reflection on the nature of death, or modify his view of it. Edersheim thinks that we must conclude from such allusions (46: 20; 48: 5) that the writer "regarded those in Hades as unconscious indeed—not truly living—but not as absolutely annihilated." But it is not probable that he reflected on that distinction. The dead were as if they were not. Nothing whatever happened to them unless by divine intervention.

Of this there is of course always the possibility. God was the Lord of death as well as of life (*cf.* 11: 14; 33: 14, 15 [36: 14, 15]); hence if Sirach had been impelled to look for a life after death it must have been in the form not of the immortality of the soul, but of resurrection "from death and Hades by the word of the Most High" (48: 5). But in fact he has no such hope. The demand for justice is met in the present life. The natural desire for individual continuance he would still satisfy in the old Hebrew way by pointing to children and reputation. "The father dies yet it is as if he

were not dead, for he leaves behind him one that is like him. In his life he saw him and rejoiced, and in his death he did not grieve. He left behind an avenger against his enemies and one that repays kindness to his friends" (30: 4-6). Yet it is "better to die childless than to have ungodly children" (16: 3). And on the other hand the consolation of this life after death is denied to wicked men. "The race of transgressors shall die out" (16: 4; 40: 15).

But there is a more individual if less tangible immortality in a good name, and this is a compensation for the shortness even of the best life. Upon this Sirach dwells with an emphasis new in Jewish writings. The thought had found occasional expression before (*cf.* Prov. 10: 7; Ps. 112: 6; Isa. 56: 4f.), but here it seems to be more consciously put in the place of any other personal continuance after death. "Have regard for the name, for that stays by you longer than a thousand great treasures of gold. A good life has but a few days, but a good name remains forever" (41: 12, 13). "The life of a man is but for a few days. . . . The wise man shall inherit trust among his people, and his name shall live forever" (37: 25-26). But those who leave no name and remembrance "perish as if they had not been, and are as if they had not been born, and their children after them" (44: 9). Of the merciful and righteous it is said, "Their bodies were buried in peace, and their name lives for generations" (44: 14). But while men usually mourn only over the body of the dead, even the name of sinners, being evil, shall be blotted out (41: 11), the immortal part perishing with the mortal.

In these two kinds of immortality, then, the hope of Sirach is summed up. A man dies, but if he has good children "it is as if he were not dead;" his days are numbered, even though his be a good life, but if he has a good name, that shall endure forever. Quite like a modern doubter he finds persistence in the race only, not in the individual. "As green leaves on a thick tree, some fall but others grow; so also the generations of flesh and blood, one dies but another is born" (14: 18).*

*The same figure is found in the Iliad VI. 146 ff. *cf.* XXI. 464 ff.

So far we have considered Sirach's views concerning the individual life, and it is that which chiefly interests him. The scheme that we have followed through presents a complete and consistent philosophy of human life,—consistent with itself, though not with the facts of experience. But the writer was a Jew as well as a moralist, and he kept something of the national feeling by the side of his predominating individualism. The national and the individual elements of his belief are quite distinct; it would not indeed be easy to show their consistency, and we seem to be in quite a new atmosphere as we pass to the expressions of the Jewish faith which the writing furnishes.

II. The National Faith.

In the frequent expressions given to the national faith Sirach differs strikingly from the Book of Proverbs. The prerogative of Israel is fully recognized, and its sign is the possession of the law. The God of all the world, its creator and maker, has chosen Israel as his own people, and revealed his will to it alone. Wisdom is represented as going forth from the mouth of God, as wandering about in search for an abiding place, and finding it at last, by the commandment of God, in Israel. "And so (says wisdom) I was established in Sion, in the city beloved likewise he made me rest; and in Jerusalem was my power, and I took root among an honored people, in the portion of the Lord, his inheritance" (24: 10-12). The wisdom thus abiding in Israel is identified with the law of Moses (v. 23 [22]), but is not limited to it. The written law is regarded mainly as regulating the common worship; the individual life he provides for, as we have seen, in another way; and he seems to oppose the work of those scribes who were already deriving from the letter of the law minute rules for the private conduct of life. It may be due to this fact that in his role of great men (ch. 44-50) he gives but five verses to Moses, while Aaron has seventeen, and that he passes over Ezra altogether, while there is an elaborate and beautiful description of the high priest Simon, and his glorious appearance in the temple on the day of atonement. Moses and Ezra were the two greatest names to the scribes of the law, but to Sirach the religious heads of the

nation were the priests, the religious center, the temple. Seven chapters (44-50) are given to the praise of Israel's great men, the presupposition throughout being God's peculiar relation to Israel.

The national hope also is shared by Sirach and finds expression in forms that remind one of the later apocalypses, and that sound strangely from the mouth of this man. In particular there is a prayer for mercy upon Israel and vengeance on its enemies which is thoroughly Messianic, using the word in the general sense, without reference to a personal Messiah. "Have mercy upon us O Lord God of all, and behold us and send thy fear upon all the nations. . . . As before them thou wast sanctified in us, so before us be thou magnified in them," i. e. 'As the afflictions visited on us, Israel, for our sins showed the nations that thou art holy, so let the punishment of the nations show us that thou art strong,'—words that perfectly express the spirit of later Judaism, summing up the hope and its ground. "Let them know thee as we have known thee. Renew the signs. . . . repeat the wonders pour out wrath hasten the time remember the oath destroy the enemy utterly. Gather the tribes of Israel together and let them inherit as at the beginning Have mercy upon the people that is called by thy name, and Israel whom thou hast likened to a first-born. . . . Fulfil the prophecies made in thy name. Give reward to those that wait for thee" (36: 1-19 [33: 1-11; 36: 16b-22]). This does not sound like our cool and calculating philosopher; it is like an apocalyptic seer. Here is the genuine Israelitish hope of a revival of national fortune, victory over enemies, reunion and glory, introduced by a miraculous intervention of God, and to be confidently expected as the fulfilment of oath and prophecy, and even demanded for the honor of God himself, that all may know that he is God.

Elsewhere the immortality of the nation is asserted. "The days of Israel are innumerable" (37: 25). "The Lord . . . will not blot out any of his works; neither will he destroy the posterity of his elect" (47: 12). The revival of Israel will be for the blessing of other peoples (44: 21f). It will be

introduced by the return of Elijah according to prophecy, and to him the author addresses the strange words, "Blessed are those who will see thee and who are adorned with love, for also we shall certainly remain alive" (48: 10-11). Does this mean that the son of Sirach, like the writers of apocalypses, expected to survive till the messianic age? So Fritzsche thinks, and so the Greek reads. But this is improbable enough in view of the general temper and views of the book. Edersheim thinks the Syriac is better. "Happy is he that shall have seen thee and die (i. e. shall see thee before he die), yet he shall not die, he shall surely live;" apparently asserting that those who live at the coming of the Messianic age shall be delivered from death (*cf.* Isa. 25: 8). Cheyne prefers the Latin, "For we live in life only, but after death there will be no such name as ours" (Job and Solomon. p. 193). From the passage in its uncertain state only this can be inferred: The restoration of Israel was to be introduced by Elijah, or preceded by his return, as predicted in Malachi, and those shall be happy who are alive at that time. That Sirach meant nothing more than this is confirmed by the sober expression of the hope in a formal prayer with which he ends his praise of famous men. "And now bless ye the God of all, who everywhere doeth mighty things; who exalteth our days from the womb, and deals with us according to his mercy. May he grant us joyfulness of heart, and that there may be peace in our days in Israel as in the days of old. May his mercy abide with us, and may he redeem us in his time" (50: 22-24). If this prayer was, as Delitzsch thought, the response made by the people in Sirach's time after the priest's blessing at the end of the temple service, it would be in the fullest sense representative of the common belief. It is more probably Sirach's composition, but may still stand for the quiet hope of the period, very much like that of later rabbinical Judaism, but giving place to far more intense and living expectations during the intervening time, from the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes (168 B. C.) to the final destruction of the Jewish political existence under Hadrian (135 A. D.).

But while Sirach seems to rise to some warmth of religious

feeling in view of the future of Israel, yet the hope does not enter practically into his view of life. He makes no appeal to it as a motive to right conduct. The thought of hastening its coming or gaining a share in it by righteousness did not occur to him. The moving impulses of life come wholly from individual considerations. "Help thy neighbor according to thy power, and take heed to thyself lest thou fall" (29: 20). "Work your work before the time, and he will give you your reward in its time" (51: 30).

Such are the principal religious ideas of Jesus son of Sirach. It is sometimes said that his book contains germs, as yet undistinguished, of both the Pharisaic and the Sadducean parties. But it is better, I think, to say that he represents at its best the tendency that issued in Sadduceeism. A cultivated and somewhat exclusive gentleman, certainly not averse to foreign learning though a patriotic Jew; inclined to a rationalistic way of thinking, though of course never doubting the Old Testament miracles; skeptical as to the existence of demons, and very reserved, at least, about angels; rejecting the doctrine of a future life, though it must by that time have been gaining converts; seeing little use in multiplying sacrifices for one's individual sins, and putting the stress on deeds and character; attached to the priests and the temple service, though thinking less of its religious significance than of the beauty and impressiveness of its ceremonies;—evidently it would be impossible to make a Pharisee out of such a man. If he had lived to the time of Antiochus he would have attached himself to the Maccabean house, but not to the protesting Asidaeans. He was a conservative in religion, and a liberal in culture,—not an uncommon combination. The Pharisees, on the contrary, were innovators in religion and reactionaries in culture. The conclusion is not in the least prejudiced by the fact that the rabbis liked to quote him and regarded him naturally as one of their number.